



Has Anyone Else Enjoyed Love and Sex with Robots?

No, I guess I thought not. It's actually not too bad. But for those of you who are thinking about it, a warning before getting too invested: you have to get through the boring, mushy stuff before you get to the juicy stuff. Normal, you say?

Except that once you get to the juicy stuff, it's actually quite... well...predictable, mechanical... more afternoon-tea than juicy. You could even find yourself waking up after an inadvertent nap, its pages crumpled over your resting heart beat...

What? Eh? Goodness, NO!! IT'S A BOOK, sicko! Yes, [Love and Sex with Robots by David Levy](#) (2008) recently got my attention as I browsed the shelves of a local bookstore. There are many grand claims there about the future possibilities of love and sex with robots, and about love and sex in general. Apparently, there is some very fancy technology just around the corner that will radically transform how we go about those most perennial and consuming of human activities - choosing and bonding with mates. And the transformations will be at lightning speed compared to those that evolution has fashioned over aeons, and in precise, purposeful directions that we humans determine. Want a buxom blond? You've got her. Want two of her? Sure thing. And for your loyalty, we'll throw in the I-Never-Nag programme for free. And if you fancy trying out something different, you could always pop down to your local robot brothel (but don't forget to tell the blonds so that they don't wait up with your cocoa).

"Imagine," Levy says, "a world in which robots are just like us (almost). A world in which the boundary between our perceptions of robots and our perceptions of our fellow humans has become so blurred that most of us treat robots as though they are mental, social, and moral beings. A world in which the general perception of robot creatures is raised to the level of our perception of biological creatures. When this happens... the effect on society will be enormous. It will be as though hordes of people from a hitherto-unknown and far-off land have emigrated to our shores... [T]heir capacity for serving as our companions, our lovers, and our life partners will in many ways be superior to those of mere mortals. I am convinced that this is how the world will be by the year 2050" (p. 303).

It might be foolish to predict whether such claims will, with hindsight, be considered prescient or

fantastical. (I'll be in my early 70s and quite possibly ranting on about the good old days of sex and procreation, and chat-up lines, and "not tonight darling", and romantic dinners that actually got digested.) But the whole idea - and, of course, current reality - of 'virtual people' gets me thinking. Putting to one side the grander claims, and their potentially troubling implications for humanity (but, of course, please do feel free to discuss/comment these), there are some interesting ways in which the oddness of robots might facilitate investigations of core human cognitive mechanisms that deal with psychological, physical, biological, and social phenomena, and how these mechanisms interact in basic thinking about persons and machines, minds and bodies, life and non-life.

For example, robots are probably quite anomalous creatures for human minds to deal with in both on-the-hoof and more careful, reflective reasoning. They can display many relevant cues to animacy, but are they really alive? They can laugh and smile, but do they really feel happy? They can say "Good Morning, Sir. You're looking dapperer today!", but do they really mean it? Of course not, we all say.

But our cognitive mechanisms are easily tripped by minimal cues to animacy and mentality. Of course your robot isn't really a person. Until you get it home, and its learning programmes rapidly generate uncannily 'spontaneous' behaviours. It appears to show remarkable sensitivities to your moods and tastes, asks you to scratch its back... up a little... left... just there!!, and beats you at a game of Uno, before seducing you into bed with a playful flash of the eyes. By this time, 'it' has likely become 'she' or 'he' and rapidly a happily-ever-after bond develops.

Then, tragically, Dilma (as she is now called) suddenly dies in a spectacular explosion. But that's ok - she's replicable, and her clone will be delivered as soon as the parts arrive.

But is the new girl really Dilma?

What, if anything, is thought to be essential about an individual person has been a difficult subject to study in psychology, and has received very little attention relative to the work on psychological essentialism for categories (social, biological, etc.). Robots, however, may be our shiny new tool.

Admittedly, we may have a tough time including buxom blond robots in the next big funding application. But there are already excellent opportunities to begin to investigate such issues in a whole new way in virtual environments. The world of Second Life, for example, is a world populated by characters the whole point of which is to be virtual and fantastical, but real enough potentially to socialize with, trade with, and even have sex with. (And if you doubt its perceived reality, see [here](#)) Like robots, these are humanly programmed and engineered avatars and their appearances and behaviours, as well as humans' interactions with them can potentially reveal a lot about quite ordinary human cognition (as well as some of its odder varieties). I understand that many university labs already have a presence in SL. (Perhaps some of the members of our Institute know about psychological experiments going on already?)

Furthermore, the study of human-robot interactions and attitudes could potentially shed light on important cross-cultural variations in core cognitive domains. For example, the different approaches of Westerners and the Japanese to their robots has been widely commented upon. To generalize grossly, Westerners see robots as tools and threats, while the Japanese see them as beings and friends. This 'fact' has been variously put down to the way in which robots are represented in popular media, to Asian technophilia, and to the respective roles of Judeo-Christian theology and Shintoism in influencing notions about what is and what isn't animate, organic matter. Assuming the differing Japanese and Western approaches to robots are indeed fact, I'm not sure how one might satisfactorily explain them. But I'm wondering if this, along with recent research and observations in the field of cognition and culture, might point toward some deep variability in the ways in which we

carve up our biological, psychological, and mechanical worlds, and in the flexibility or rigidity with which we categorize kinds (e.g. as 'person' or 'object', 'living' or 'inert') and individuals (as Dilma or not Dilma). Given the facility with which we ascribe agency, mentality, and personality to all kinds of entities in the world (including cars, computers, and plants), why are Westerners so uncomfortable with the idea of robots as persons, friends, spouses, and lovers? And are we really so peculiar? If so, why?

Here end my few disparate, rambling thoughts and queries about love, sex, and other stuff with robots, and about personal identity, the West and the Rest, and (stretching it a little) the future of our species. Maybe they'll hook some interests out there.

I saved the juicy stuff until last, but unfortunately I have run out of time and space...